

'Witches' and 'Viruses:' The Activist-Academic Threat and a Policy Response

By Joy Pullmann and Sumantra Maitra

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During the period of revolution, only that literature which promotes the consolidation of the workers in their struggle against the exploiters is necessary and progressive. Under Socialism, solidarity will be the basis of society. Literature and art will be tuned to a different key.

– Leon Trotsky

How much of academia is infiltrated by activists? Some conservatives claim that “neo-Marxism” and its sister paradigms like feminist pedagogy, post-structuralism, and post-modernism have long infected certain departments in the humanities and social sciences. Those paradigms have now spread to more disciplines and funding committees.¹

However, conservatives have been slow to explain how activist departments capture institutions.² In that light, this policy brief reviews two feminist papers that detail institutional capture. The campus activism process is quite successful and it’s critical to show how activists use academic departments to capture institutions (both on the faculty and the administrative sides). For leaders who want to protect institutions against a political takeover, some workable and achievable policies can help them preserve a free academy.

How Activists Hijack Academic Departments

The rise of the activist professor in the academy has meant the emergence of a pattern in remaking a department’s goals from a search for truth into an engine for socio-political change. The process goes somewhat like this: In theory, activist paradigms like feminism promote, justify, and encourage interdisciplinary studies like feminist geography.³ The research churned out is peer reviewed by a self-referential cadre of activists and ideologues from similar disciplines.⁴ Volumes of meaningless research and jargon-filled papers pile up, giving the professors a high citation count and boosting their chances for university appointment and tenure, though not on

¹ Yes, “feminist geography” is a real discipline. For example, see Nicole Laliberte, Kate Driscoll Derickson, and Lorraine Dowler, “[Advances in Feminist Geography](#),” *Political Geography, Politics and Sexuality and Gender*, 2010. For further reading, see Susan Stanford Friedman, “[Statement: Academic Feminism and Interdisciplinarity](#),” *Feminist Studies*, 2001; Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward, “[Gender Studies and Interdisciplinarity](#),” *Palgrave Communications*, 2015; and Victoria Pileggi et al, “[Becoming Scholars in an Interdisciplinary Feminist Learning Context](#),” *Feminist Teacher*, 2015.

² For countless examples of such research, scroll through [Real Peer Review](#).

¹ See Arthur Milikh, “[Preventing Suicide by Higher Education](#),” *National Affairs*, Number 42, Winter 2020.

² MG Flood, B Martin, and T Dreher, “Combining academia and activism: common obstacles and useful tools,” *Australian Universities Review*, 55 (1), 17-26.

merit.⁵ Many funding committees, be it in research or scholarship, are usually dominated by seniority, and senior positions are usually dominated by those with a greater number of research and papers.⁶ This process results in an ideological monoculture in several disciplines and departments, threatening more and more of academia.⁷ After activists change the academic culture, they can educate their replacements and other students who will become activists in government, media, nongovernmental organizations, the corporate world, and other professions.⁸ The result is clear to see.

To take an obvious example, the sudden massive increase of LGBT and feminist and transgender narratives in media, academic, and corporate sectors in the last 20 years did not just happen in a vacuum.⁹ Propaganda results in policy.

The activist takeover can determine what students learn in an academic discipline, such as international relations. A recent paper, for example, suggested that “constructivism was the most preferred paradigm for women, followed by liberalism

⁵ For a detailed description of the process of this “infiltration” see James Lindsay’s [“How the Woke Virus Infects Academia and Our Covid-19 Response,”](#) *New Discourses*, April 4, 2020.

⁶ For a list of such papers, see the Real Peer Review account, mentioned in the footnote above, which lists such activist disciplines and research. For examples of how volumes of such meaningless jargon filled papers fill up academia and, in turn, positions of seniority at university departments, see [“Queer International Relations”](#) papers.

⁷ For bias in academia, see, G Yancey, 2018, [“Yes Academic Bias is a Problem and We Need to Address It: A Response to Larregue”](#) *An Soc.*, 49: 336.

⁸ See Lisa Wade, [“Why Are Academics So Liberal?”](#) *The Society Pages*, January 20, 2010; and Andy Kiersz and Hunter Walker, [“These Charts Show The Political Bias Of Workers In Each Profession,”](#) *Business Insider*, November 3, 2014; and [“Yale faculty skews liberal, survey shows,”](#) *Yale Daily News*, September 14, 2017; and [“Professors moved left since 1990,”](#) *Heterodox Academy*, January 9, 2016.

⁹ Scott Yenor, [“Sex, Gender, and the Origin of the Culture Wars: An Intellectual History.”](#) The Heritage Foundation, June 30, 2017.

(27%)” and that female IR scholars believe that constructivism and feminism are having a significant impact in the field.¹⁰ It goes on to show how skewed is the research between men and women in IR. That impact comes in what professors teach students and what they don’t: “Half of women spend between 6% and 25% of the class discussing Marxism, while only one-third of men spend the same amount of time introducing students to Marxist ideas,” the paper noted. Activism-oriented professors also create spurious subfields such as queer international relations theory.¹¹ That, in turn, results in adverse effects on the armed forces and foreign policy.¹²

As activist scholars determine what students might learn, they can also affect job prospects after graduation. Women scholars heavily focus on issues like refugee aid, human rights, NGOs, activism, and the environment, while men mostly study military strategy, hard power, and foreign policy. Other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, communications, and English are even more infected.

Conservatives have long warned that the primary building blocks of the university have been infiltrated by activist disciplines, which act as agents of change from within. That “long march through the institutions” is

¹⁰ See, D Maliniak, A Oakes, S Peterson, and M Tierney, “Women in International Relations,” *Politics & Gender*, 2008, 4: 12–144.

¹¹ See, C Weber, [“Why is there no queer international theory?”](#) *European Journal of International Relations*, 2014, 21 (1).

¹² For more on “feminist foreign policies,” see [“Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy,”](#) [“Feminist foreign policy,”](#) Government of Sweden; [“Sweden’s Feminist Foreign Policy, Long May It Reign,”](#) *Foreign Policy*, January 2019; [“One Small Step for Feminist Foreign Policy,”](#) *Foreign Policy*, September 2018; and Clement, R. and Thompson, L., “Toward a Feminist Foreign Policy in the United States,” *International Center for Research on Women*, 2019. For how it affects military policies, see, James Hasson, “Stand Down: How Social Justice Warriors Are Sabotaging America’s Military,” 2019.

associated with Rudi Dutschke, a German Marxist who suggested a violent revolution in Western societies was unlikely, so bringing about radical social change would need to come through “capturing” institutions and professions.¹³

Some conservatives started a counter-movement, while others sounded more fatalistic and argued that parallel institutions are necessary, as the mainstream ones were already lost.¹⁴ Even some liberals agree that there is an ideological monoculture in academia that is detrimental to the institution.¹⁵ Other critics on the left dismiss the argument as a conspiracy theory—usually those who are products and beneficiaries of the takeover of institutions.¹⁶ In reality, we have seen de-platforming and activism within academia, often against conservatives, sometimes even against fellow liberals.¹⁷ Many instances of de-platforming and anti-speech protests were started by professors leading a group of students.¹⁸

¹³ See “[The Left’s Long March Through The Institutions Is Now Pretty Much Complete, And It’s A Disaster](#),” Center for Individualism, May 19, 2019; and HJ Horchem, “The Long March Through the Institutions,” Conflict Studies, Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1973, Vol. 33; and H Marcuse, *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, Vol. 6, 2014; and Roger Kimball, *The Long March: How the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s Changed America*, 2001.

¹⁴ “[Scrap universities to end left-wing bias, says Sir Roger Scruton](#),” *The Times*, March 16, 2019.

¹⁵ See “[The academic hoax with a serious purpose](#),” Jun 7, 2019, *Australian Financial Review*; Helen Pluckrose, “[How French ‘Intellectuals’ Ruined the West: Postmodernism and Its Impact, Explained](#),” March 2017, *Aero Magazine*.

¹⁶ See “[Unwrapping the Conspiracy Theory at the Heart of the Alt-Right](#),” *Vice*, February 2017; “[‘Cultural Marxism’: a uniting theory for rightwingers who love to play the victim](#),” *The Guardian*, January 2015; John Tierney, “[Journalists Against Free Speech](#),” *City Journal*, Autumn 2019.

¹⁷ See Michael Shermer, “[The Unfortunate Fallout of Campus Postmodernism The roots of the current campus madness](#),” *Scientific American*, September 2017.

¹⁸ A partial list of academic open-letter campaigns, almost always started by activist-academics: Noah

Conservatives and libertarians have found themselves helpless against this marginalization, whether in media or in academia.

The Explicit Goal of Activists: Manipulate the Academy

Activists want to capture academia and re-orient it, and some professors have not been shy about saying so. Two feminist papers, Breanne Fahs and Michael Karger’s “*Women’s Studies as Virus*” (2016) and Araby Smyth, Jess Linz, and Lauren Hudson’s “*A Feminist Coven in the University*” (2019), shed light on how institutional capture works.¹⁹

In the first paper, published in *Hypatia*, an influential feminist journal, Fahs and Karger noted that feminism is intended for activism and is not objective in nature, unlike other academic disciplines.²⁰ “Women’s studies originated from radical and frankly activist origins that threatened conventional power imbalances,” Fahs wrote, and that “by virtue of its interdisciplinary, critical, and ‘infectious’ structure,” has attached itself to “numerous

Carl, “[A List of Academic Petitions and Open Letters](#),” October 2019.

¹⁹ The two papers are Breanne Fahs and Michael Karger, “[Women’s Studies as Virus: Institutional Feminism, Affect, and the Projection of Danger](#),” *Hypatia Journal*, 2016; and Araby Smyth, Jess Linz, and Lauren Hudson, “[A feminist coven in the university](#),” *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 2019.

²⁰ *Hypatia* is the highest-ranking feminist journal and, incidentally, was hoaxed during the Sokal Squared fiasco when it published hoax papers. For more, see “[Feminist philosophy journal Hypatia finds a new home at UO](#)” University of Oregon, Apr 24, 2019; and JK Melchior “[Fake News Comes to Academia](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 5, 2018. Fahs has [around 2,000 citations](#) on Google Scholar for her papers on feminist activism and is noted for her leadership in performative activism, such as growing body hair on women, as a mode of social subversion. See “[ASU professor encourages students to defy body hair norms](#),” Arizona State University, July 3, 2014; and “[This Professor Offers Female Students Extra Credit For Not Shaving Their Armpits](#),” *Buzzfeed*, July 2014.

partnerships, cross-listings and interdisciplinary projects across the university.”

Fahs argued that feminist scholars need to train students “to serve as symbolic ‘viruses’ that infect, unsettle, and disrupt traditional and entrenched fields.” Feminism “attaching” itself to interdisciplinary projects has expanded its reach, she noted, growing from “a small handful of programs in 1970 to over 600 programs by the mid-1990s.”²¹

Through those programs, Fahs wrote, feminism has destroyed the hierarchical model of education and made space for “personal relationships” and familial bonds between teachers and students, similar to the parent-child bond. And, just as parents shape children, professors can shape impressionable minds into activists. She also suggested identifying men as potential “viruses” because they are not usually identifiable as feminists.

Fahs suggests that “Similarly, women’s studies programs are allowed to settle into corporate universities and regenerate themselves through the education of students and by manipulating portions of the academy under their control. Using interdisciplinary women’s studies coursework as a springboard, women’s studies students are then ‘set loose.’” Once the students are “infected” by a “feminist virus,” they can then “corrupt” other institutions, committees, professions, and so forth.²² By shaping students and professors (current and future) into feminists, activists can take over all aspects of the university:

“These infectious students, carrying the blueprints of feminist pedagogies, step into other programs and reconstitute themselves through the work they submit and through interaction with instructors and

student peers. This infects the formerly isolated and protected, traditional disciplines (e.g., history, mathematics, physics, psychology, and so on) with principles of critical feminist analysis. Unwittingly, then, the corporate university begins to integrate, bit-by-bit, portions of feminist pedagogies into its own ideology.”

The results are clear, Fahs wrote: “Women’s studies already pose a real danger to the corporate, patriarchal (white, middle-class, able-bodied, etc.) status quo. Women’s studies programs have successfully lobbied history departments to more seriously address the lives of women, just as they have outlined theoretical and empirical ways to understand intersecting and interlocking identities and oppressions.” She also noted that this process has already “invaded traditionally ‘male’ fields like philosophy and English” and that, in psychology, “feminists have made it possible for women to not only invade the (traditionally male and pathologizing) field, but to radically take it over; psychology is now dominated by female students who make up 72% of Ph.D. and Psy.D. recipients entering the field in 2007 compared to just 20% in 1970.”²³

The second paper by Araby Smyth, Jess Linz, and Lauren Hudson takes Fahs and Karger’s process one step further, asking graduate students to form “feminist covens” within academia.²⁴ There is no time for “respectability politics, patience,” they argue, suggesting that the coexistence of feminism and opposing ideologies cannot continue. Feminists, then, should behave like insurgents and “be hideous in the face of patriarchy and protect each other when it strikes back.”²⁵ They also suggest academics should “make unreasonable demands that

²¹ Fahs and Karger, “Women’s Studies as Virus.”

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Smyth et al., “A feminist coven.”

²⁵ Ibid.

push past the solutions we are used to. Abandon appropriate behavior: be loud, disruptive, impatient, and impractical,” and to initiate direct actions, like subverting “the norms of thought and action.”

It is feminist to break the law, they argue, and seek the destruction of social institutions. “Make new spaces where rebels construct the discourse,” they wrote. “We must be loud enough to expose the secrets of our departments and institutions, and strong enough to protect the speakers.”²⁶

Protecting the Academy from the Activists

One can see the influence of the sort of thinking argued above throughout the university. From direct action that de-platforms speakers with minority opinions to subversive actions like professors using students as pawns in intra-campus power struggles, the activists have a strong influence on campus. Genuine scholars are often oblivious to these efforts, either keeping their heads down and focusing on their own research or cocooned away from the activists’ excesses. Conservatives are largely helpless to tackle the onslaught alone and the spurious use of “academic freedom” as a defense shields activists.

Conservatives should not be left alone to preserve the university as a place where the pursuit of truth and knowledge is put above political motivations. Libertarians should want to stop taxpayer money being used to promote leftist political goals. Liberals who believe in evidence-based research should oppose the activist takeover because their disciplines are fundamentally subjective in nature. And conservatives—the guardians of civilizational heritage—should be furious at the attempted subversion of Western civilization.

Those opposed to the activist takeover need to unite around a plan of action for reform. Just as activists expanded their influence among professors, administrators, and state political leaders, reformers who want to renew the academy need to do something similar. A few policy guidelines could be debated, refined, and implemented to address this lack of response.

1. Limit public funds for activist disciplines

A key first step would be to ensure that taxpayers do not fund ideological disciplines. While government interference in education is not recommended, it is indeed the government’s duty to ensure that the tax dollars contribute to the pursuit of knowledge—not activism. Universities do not host tax-funded departments of phrenology, craniometry, or alchemy, and nor should they tolerate activist beachheads such as feminist geography or feminist biology. A withdrawal or strict screening process for federal and state grants, taxpayer-backed loans, and scholarships for fields of study with too much activism could be enacted. Enshrining a “no politics and activism in education” policy would also streamline programs and restore more genuine scholarship and professionalism.

2. Increase scrutiny on departments for ideological bias and fund independent reviews to identify activism

Governing boards need to investigate which disciplines are ideologically biased and make efforts to address the rot. An easy way to do that is to tally research and measure its ideological tilt. The public good provided by academic research comes from the pursuit of truth, not the pursuit of politics. Ideologically diverse (especially conservatives, given their low numbers in academia) academics, analysts, and think tanks, for example, should

²⁶ Ibid.

be funded to discover, measure, and produce reports about bias in departments.

Independent, cross-referencing studies could also be done to measure bias in university departments. With the help of experts in the field, the studies would be vigilant about ideological nonsense masquerading as academic work and be instinctively skeptical of “interdisciplinary projects,” along with their funding sources.

3. Return to a selective, traditional conception of academia

Academia also needs to move back to being selective and embracing the wisdom of its professors to design the curriculum, rather than catering to ephemeral student desires. Mass-churning departments should also invite funding and scholarship scrutiny. For example, an engineering or polytechnic diploma that teaches to construct ventilators will always have social value. A creative writing bachelor’s degree influenced by critical theory? Not so much. The funds allocated to mass-producing artists and literary critics should be given instead to the vocational training, manufacturing, and trade sectors producing more engineers and nurses. It is unlikely that great art or artists will be mass-produced, and the simple laws of supply and demand would indicate the West is in need of far more manufacturers, traders, and entrepreneurs of all sorts than film critics or thespians. It would also bring about a sense of fiscal responsibility in students and make them more responsible for funding their own education, which should increase market pressure on them to study marketable and needed skills.

4. Crack down on ideology and limitations on academic freedom

Universities should adopt statements of support for free expression, viewpoint diversity, and the search for truth. Those statements will set the tone for the intellectual

and social climate on campuses. If colleges and academic departments want to stifle opinions that they deem ideologically unworthy, then public funding for them should be reconsidered. A simple “free speech on campus” law providing that any institution receiving taxpayer funds must guarantee student free speech rights and punish criminal acts of violence that restrict others’ speech would ensure a level playing field for differing political views.

The academy also needs to be truly neutral with sex-based federal laws and programs that have developed an ideological bent (such as Title IX, the National Labor Relations Board, federal employment and discrimination laws, etc.). Criminal cases and instances of sexual assault should be in the hands of law enforcement, and harassment claims are best judged in state courts, not college tribunals. No parallel institutions within higher education should have judicial powers. More often than not, those functions are merely employment programs for ideological bureaucrats, funded by taxpayers whom the bureaucrats despise.

Likewise, legal remedies for racism should be implemented to ensure that university appointments are based on objective merit, not subjective and unquantifiable criteria decided by unaccountable bureaucrats that discriminate against high-performing minority groups. Conservatives should enact legal measures to cut back parallel and expanding bureaucratic institutions within academia.²⁷ An open debate on “social justice” activism within universities, and the state and federal funding it receives, is also urgently needed to estimate the size of the problem.²⁸

²⁷ See Hal R. Arkes and George W. Dent, Jr., “[Testing Affirmative Action](#),” James G. Martin Center, May 20, 2020.

²⁸ See David Randall, “Social Justice Education in America,” National Association of Scholars, 2019.

5. Imitate leftist viral groups to preserve academic freedom and free speech

As mentioned above, most de-platforming incidents can be traced to a small minority of ideological academics trying to sideline their opponents, with the help of activist and volatile students. More often than not, the victims are conservatives, libertarians, and moderate liberals. That is unjust, and conservatives with political power should strictly defend first principles. While it is not the government's job to indoctrinate, it is the government's job to govern and ensure a level playing field without indoctrination. Defending the status quo would be tantamount to censoring students, faculty, and administrators who hold unpopular views.

The tactics of Fahs' "feminist viruses" gives reformers a model for changing the status quo. Conservative students or professors should group together to engage in activism against politicization and ideological indoctrination. They could document and demonstrate to the world what is going on within academic walls. They could refute ideological nonsense and create a counter-narrative to propaganda that purports to be a rigorous education. Until lawmakers and the public recognize the threat to education and ideological diversity, renewing the academy will be an uphill battle.

The above policy guidelines need to be debated and fine-tuned. Reformers of different stripes have focused on certain aspects of the problem, but so far have been slow to create a plan for renewal.

About the Authors

Joy Pullmann ([@JoyPullmann](#)) is the executive editor of *The Federalist*, a former education fellow at Heartland Institute, and a former Robert Novak journalism fellow.

Sumantra Maitra ([@MrMaitra](#)) is a senior contributor to *The Federalist*, a doctoral scholar at the University of Nottingham, and a nonresident fellow at the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal.

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353 E. Six Forks Road, Suite 200
Raleigh, NC 27609

919.828.1400

jamesgmartin.center